

*Therefore, I am*

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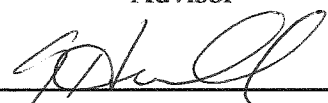
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## Abstract

My current research explores our daily habits, cultural traditions, and the social expectations placed on women through an anthropological lens. Considering the treatment of all types of women from various regions prompted me to look at my own everyday experiences as a female living in a rural community while working in an urban setting. My research focuses on the exploration of duties associated to the roles of women, and the pre-constructed format embedded in our memories. Through the observation of habitual patterns, places and objects can bring attention to the epidemic of this power struggle, one that reinforces the misconceptions of women's mind, body, and spirit in our current world.

Consumer culture drives fierce competition between women to achieve an ideal persona and encourages memetic rivalry among all economic classes. Social anxieties and cultural expectations are used to ingrain carefully coordinated characteristics. Of course, women's duties vary from region to region, but some tasks seem to linger on as "women's work" regardless of regionalized economic, social, or cultural constructs. For example, many women across the world are pressured to take responsibility for household chores. Product endorsements and advertising strategies back up this way of thinking by targeting women. The "feminine role" has become a subliminal focus of a product's commercials and printed materials. Very rarely do you see an ad focusing on a smiling man in an apron, serving a woman sitting at the dinner table an appealing plate of fresh, hot food. This precept is embedded in our psyche at a very young age through endless overstimulation; an on-the-job training, per se. Once this way of thinking is implanted, it is periodically reinforced within cultural activities. This behavior limits a woman's access to true freedom of choice and reinforces a manufactured reality, versus that of a true reality.

Growing up semi-isolated did not make me exempt from being implanted with habitual patterns, but it did allow time for me to develop an uncommon perspective. My work is inspired by the memories I equate with my identity, the effects of emotional labor, and their associated stereotypes. I use unique forms of storytelling to share concepts rooted in my own life. Each piece is a reflection of these experiences, and that of others. By creating an isolated space of contemplation through installation, I encourage my audience to witness my unique story, and reflect on the roles we are pressured to pursue. I encourage my audience to reconsider their way of thinking about their identities and their connection to objects. “The way humans symbolize the world of objects is intimately connected with their capacity for self-reflection and with (the) consciousness of being.”<sup>1</sup>

My body of work is a combination of individual endeavors, as well as, collaborative projects, that examine memory as the building block of identity. Much of my research looks at the social and cultural effects of everyday moments. My work includes personalized themes and traditional techniques with a contemporary flare. Pursuing creative endeavors based on my own identity has allowed me to share my stories through multiple layers of meaning and materials.

## Never Give Up

I am heavily influenced by individuals who find ways to overcome adversity and rise to the occasion to create a whirlwind of opportunities for themselves and the people around them. The story of Zitkala-Sa, a Yankton Dakota woman who overcame great obstacles to become a successful teacher, writer, editor, musician, and activist, is just one example.<sup>2</sup> She

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<sup>1</sup> Henrietta L. Moore. *The Subject of Anthropology*, 82.

<sup>2</sup> Native American Writers, Zitkala-Sa. *Writer/artist information*.

merged into the life that was forced upon her and found a way to conquer hardships faced by Native American women. She attended a Quaker boarding school in the state of Indiana, where government policies attempted to strip away her identity but she did not give up. I respect her spunk, her drive to positively change her world, and her ability to adapt; to make her own opportunities in the worst of circumstances.

The most valuable lesson I received from Zitkala-Sa's story is that adapting to a new way of life does not mean you have to give up your cultural heritage. This way of thinking has inspired me to embrace my past and pursue my future. My identity is relevant to my memories of the history I have experienced through cultural habits.

I can remember my father contributing hours to growing plants. Plants for our garden, plants for the animals, and plants for the market. There are endless processes and procedures to harvesting crops. One item I associate to the memory of my father is the scraps of baling twine and garden rope that accumulated around the farm.

*Cube 7. 2017. Fabric.*



As for my mother, she spent much of her time working with textiles. She would work long hours repairing our clothing and making other needed items, such as pillows and rugs. Watching my mother gather every feasible scrap to re-use

elsewhere encouraged me not to be wasteful. In this way of thinking, I gathered my father's

scraps and decided to sew, weave, and wax these remnants. I made several pieces of jewelry and a variety of belts, very much like the ones I saw in fashion magazines of the time.



*Enchained.* 2017.

Handmade paper, thread, & metal.

I made my own opportunity; to be accepted into the ‘cool’ group of teenage girls through fashion. I rarely think of those girls today when I look at some of these items, or one of the many creations that followed. However, I do think about my father and mother and why it matters to me when I look at my work, especially those pieces that reuse materials in a unique way. It was normal to use materials in an average way, but we also used uncommon methods in combination with materials to create solutions.

I am extremely influenced by the calculated habits of my family. They are all talented in a number of crafts and many of these characteristics stem from traditions that have been shared in my family for generations. I enjoy using the same materials and processes that derive from my family’s histories. It is crucial to adapt existing traditions with each generation to promote inclusion, and to stabilize the longevity of authentic cultural traits. Exhibiting bits of my personal heritage is the most powerful gift I can give my art, as well as my audience, because it preserves everyday rituals through multiple layers of meaning.

## The Importance of Place

Much of my work and conceptual research is born from a local forest where I spend time thinking about a number of ideas and issues. This peaceful place of reflection has allowed me to think about the realities of the world with an undisturbed, clear perspective. I have spent many hours of my life interacting with this environment. This specific place is within walking distance of my childhood home, where my parents still reside today.



*The Forest.* 2016. Photograph.

Growing up, we lingered for many hours in the forest as a family. We would hunt for mushrooms and gather dried branches for kindling. When I think about the texture of bark and the scent of mushrooms, I fondly think about my family and the forest. It is the place where I learned how to fish and how to build a tree stand for hunting. I associate the sounds of this place with some aspects of these tasks. When I hear the dripping of water, I remember the moment I placed a worm on a hook and pulled my first sunfish out of the water. I would

also flee from the world by running into the woods when my emotions would get the best of me. The calm wind brushing across my face and the swaying of the trees is soothing and therapeutic. The forest is a vital part of my daily life.

Including elements of important places can mark the passing of memorable moments and share a glimpse of my history. This idea is slightly removed from the concept of time, but definitely an indicator of my life span. Flashes of my past come to life when I walk in this particular forest. I can visually experience this move in time by looking at a tree that once was used as a fence post. I can remember being afraid of the barbed wire at the top of the fence that I struggled to get my small body over. My desire to access the sparkling water was great than my fear injury. Today, that trail of rusted metal wire is all that is left of the great barrier. The tree engulfed the sharp slivers of barbed wire which now hangs over my head, towering at nearly eleven feet. I cannot communicate every semiotic layer but I can highlight aspects of a place that reflect the fundamental connection to nature that we all share, regardless if my direct childhood memory is known.

### Memory and the Indexical

Making paper reminds me of the forest, and the serenity that I find there. The dripping of the cool water and the way the sheets of paper feel under my fingers is part of my phenomenal connection to nature. The sound the paper makes when it is pulled from the fabric reminds me of the wet leaves sticking to my shoes and the occasional splashing of the fish in the water. I associate these sounds and aromas with the forest. Making papers has become a therapeutic process for me because of these nostalgic associations.



Thinking about the historical, meditative, and personal relationships that can exist between process and place, is what inspired me to make prints and paper with natural objects from my preferred location, the forest that I hold dear. I began by returning to these woodlands and walking in my childhood steps.



*Bark.* 2017. Ink on panel.

I found a large piece of bark that came from the tree I once claimed as my fortress. The life of this bark has now evolved beyond its original location; a hand pressed print, embedded and embossed handmade paper, and three-dimensional wall pieces. This exploration made me consider the possibilities beyond my original direction.

It prompted me to explore a variety of ways to embed anything and everything. Handmade paper has the potential to be very fragile and extremely durable. I learned about paper through none stop papermaking. I usually make paper every week. Sometimes, I cast from plaster molds or other objects. Sometimes, my art mimics real life. The message appears to be clear and it is almost exactly what you could have imagined. Other times, the layers of meaning are less obvious because it is deeply personal.



Process shot. 2018. Handmade paper.

My current body of work can be seen as my visual autobiography. The selected materials and processes symbolize my evolution as an artist, as a woman, as a human. It tells my raw story. I control my messages in such a way that I can turn down the volume of what I want to keep more private while allowing the audience to gain a clear picture of the person I am. Working with fundamental themes invites my audience to not only witness my memories, but to add their own interpretation to common objects that they associate to pleasant remembrances.

*Money Tree.* 2016. Handmade paper



Frequently, I make sheets of paper with plant inclusions from this forest, or with various other items from my life that prompted the recollection of memorable moments. I consider this process a type of honorary sacrifice. It is a preservation of my identity and a way to share a glimpse of my histories.

My paper could contain the last seeds that I was given by my grandmother, or even what was left of

my grandfather Korean War field jacket. Making paper has become part of my personal ritual. It is symbolic and prolific.

## The Wind Whispered to Me

In my thesis work, I decided to recreate what I deemed sacred. It seemed valuable to consider the most appropriate way to communicate my profound relationship with papermaking and the forest that gives life to these processes.

This way of thinking motivated me to fabricate an altar-inspired book stand with matching clothesline poles that replicates some qualities of the forest. I used resin and indigo colored ink to create raindrops on the branches, and puddles at the base of each clothesline pole, which was anchored by miniature milk buckets. I fabricated my steel structures to mimic the bare branches of the forest. I made each one light enough in weight to sway as the trees do in the wind and strong enough to hold many objects while surviving a crowded opening reception.



*Therefore, I am.* 2018 Installation. Opening Reception.

Early on, I knew that a poetic rendition of my memories would best convey the story of the serenity I find in the forest. Dissecting my identity has been a chaotic and wondrous process. I conducted a self-inflicted ethnographical study to ensure that I would find the common threads that unit the duty driven endeavors of women beyond my own backyard.



Handmade paper, 2018.

I constantly battled with, “Do they all want to run away too?!” The work load is never-ending and the expected standard is mostly unreachable. My tools were not the practical extension of my body, but more so a tool for my mind because they allowed time for my thoughts to churn while “modern” accessories took some of the laborious actions away from my hands.

My thoughts in the forest run with complete freedom. I wanted my art to express my love for the forest and even the love I have for my tools, the ones that remind me of the duties that overwhelm me. I created a poem, *The Wind Whispers to Me*, to reflect all these ideas in a playful and yet slightly dark manner; a reflection of my true self.



The Wind Whispers to Me. 2018.  
Silkscreened book case

I selected an aqua colored book cloth because it reminded me of the colors that reflected from the shallow edge of the water where it dropped off into the deep blue green lake. I printed a photograph of my lovely landscape onto the cloth that I used to cover my book case. After many late nights of struggling over the appropriate binding style, I had an epiphany. I decided to make my book unique like me.

*The Wind Whispers to Me*, 2018.  
Handmade unique book

I constructed many models of modified calm shell book cases and determined a unique binding style would be perfect for my poetic style. I created a box that confined my book to its structure. I used black silky ribbons, that I permanently attached into the lid, in combination with seamstress techniques to sew each individual page into the box. My handmade paper pages swing from each section by a ribbon bound stick that I collected from my forest. I was inspired by the piano hinge binding style to create this swing hinge. From my perspective, it was the ideal way to communicate the beauty and restrictive nature of being a woman, while staying true to my free spirit, the one that roams among the trees.



The forest – working on location. 2018.



I spent a great deal of time in the forest to make executive decisions about what I should empathize and what would help bring my forest to the gallery. I decided to cast a living tree



onsite; the tree of my barbed wire memory. I gathered water from the edge of the lake and used casting gauze to create an impression of this tree. From this mold, I created endless failures of almost bark-like paper. Not quite what I was going for, but I did not give up. After multiple test, I concluded that the best way to make handmade paper look like bark, is to mold the wet sheets directly on the bark.

*Tree Bark.* 2018. Handmade paper

After a long process, I was able to make multiple bark embossed sheets, which became the cloak-like covering of my altar book stand. I was pleased to be able to have another

memorable experience with my fence post tree, and to communicate the importance of this place to others without the need to highlight my barbed wire scars.

## Freedom of Materials



*Death Mask.* 2017. Bronze.

I do not confine myself to paper alone. I enjoy using other materials to convey complex narratives. I can create conversation between the art objects themselves. I enjoy using metal just as

much as handmade paper. Each isolation or combination of materials can constitute its own meaning based on our preconceptions. The connotation of materials allows its isolation to create a unique meaning and narrative.

Growing up in a rural area, everyone had an identity attached to the farm. There were expectations and duties to accompany the roles that men and women were appointed. In my life, the combination of metal and paper, as well as the way these materials can be displayed, remind me of my mother, father, and I, because of my perception of the roles we have played since my childhood.<sup>3</sup>



*Tied,* 2016. Combat Paper & Cotton Linter, Thread.

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<sup>3</sup> Moore. *The Subject of Anthropology*, 73-77. The concept that gender roles and assigned duties are imprinted in our way of thinking about the people in our lives, from a very young.

## The Color of Womanhood

I can recall the impact that Barbara Kruger's work had on me as a young woman. Kruger is an American conceptual artist who has had a major impact on society because of her willingness to bring attention to the way our identities are constructed through visual advertising of preferred behaviors. She highlights the power struggle that occurs between sub-groups through gendered and sexualized public content.<sup>4</sup> Kruger's work inspires me to fight back.

*Enchained*. 2017. Handmade paper, thread, & metal.



I wanted to use my art to prompt a dialog about issues I felt were important too. The purpose of *Enchained* was to start a conversation about the acceptance and tolerance of abuse and violence in our society. High

profile social problems of the rich and famous take center stage on media platforms while the everyday misfortunes of our communities are overlooked. This piece has very personal layers rooted in my own experiences, and the public layer has created a conversation that has the potential to generate a wave of change. This piece allowed me to confront my past and create dialogue about treating each other with kindness, every time someone wanted to talk about this work. Art has given me a soapbox to shout from, and it has created a platform for conversation about current issues.

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<sup>4</sup> Artnet. Artist information page.



The discussions that developed from my peers' review of *Enchained* made me think about more than the social issues that inspired it. This piece helped me understand the types of messages my work could convey based on materials and/or ways of displaying objects. This began a cycle of arranging and rearranging my work. I was constantly questioning people about materials and what memories it prompted. It seems you could select a number of topics and use similar visual cues to draw the audience down a chosen path.

These days, I am just as infatuated with the way Kruger's words and the way they flow across imagery in a confident and defiant manner. Her work reminded me of the deep red lipstick I loved and how much I enjoyed using the old tubes to write messages on the mirrors of public restrooms. The statement maker will always have a special place in my heart, just like that misguided nostalgia of red lipstick. I enjoy using the passionate color palette of lipstick shades and a sassy narrative to boot.



*United*, 2017. Handmade paper & ink on BFK Rives

## Fashion & Mass Deception

Fashion magazine apparel and body image challenges have sparked my interest for some years now. The lack of fashionable clothing for body types that do not fit the standard can cause permanent damage to a person's perspective, and even lead to unhealthy habits.

This way of thinking stands out to me because my relationship with clothing manifested from my slightly less common background. I was unaware of the struggle that many women had with clothing and body image when I was a young girl. My mother, as well as other women in my family, designed and custom tailored my clothing. Every item usually fit well and I never had to worry about showing up at school wearing the same outfit as someone else. I can recall moments in which I felt embarrassed and much like an outsider in such unique outfits. No one wants their friends to know that they have a dress made from the same fabric as the quilt on their parent's bed.

As a teenager, I fell in love with commercialized fashion, and this is when the downward spiral of my self-esteem really began. I battled department store sales racks and altered my existing clothing to find the best look to enhance my bony, teenage body for the upcoming season. My love for lipstick and everything fashionably-made-from-metal boiled over. Everybody wanted to be a *Material Girl*.<sup>5</sup> I gave up my authentic handmade culture to unknowingly embrace the mass deception of manufactured conformity.<sup>6</sup> The calculated strategies that are dressed up in glamorously colored, glossy prints are designed to blindside the audience. I now realize how lucky I was to have persistent and talented women to guide me through my love/hate relationship for clothing and the body.

In today's world, we should all be aware of the scam; realizing that a fashion magazine is an organized compilation of direct advertisements with unrealistic standards that are strategized to promote consumerism. It is okay that your body is shaped that way and that clothes do not really fit 'as directed' most of the time.

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<sup>5</sup> Madonna, *Like a Virgin, Material Girl*, 1984.

<sup>6</sup> Adorno & Horkheimer. Many of my ideas about consumerism are a reflection of my personal views. These concepts are heavily saturated in propaganda and can be explained further through the philosophy and theories of Europeans that experienced the ramifications of Nazi Germany.

*Body Armor*, 2017.  
Handmade paper & fabric.



For too long, people have gone to great lengths to appear flawless to others by any means necessary. Fashionable trends have even encouraged consumers to endanger their health in hopes of quick, reliable results. Retail giants force their way into our life through the ‘necessity of clothing’ and propaganda-style advertising tactics that attempt to convince its viewers that we are abnormal.<sup>7</sup> It is time to break free of this way of thinking,

and it is time to take back our self-worth. We can no longer tolerate the repressive agenda forced onto our bodies and our identities by overreaching entities of power. This behavior has led to a world full of individuals with poor body image and an overall lack of confidence. “Our identity as consumers interacts with other social identities and relations...through our purchase decisions and through the way we use goods we not only shape ourselves as particular consumers, but also express and stabilize our different identities and cultural orientations.”<sup>8</sup>

The idea that our bodies are the revolution, inspired my adventure in wearable arts. I used my body to create a sculpted torso from handmade paper. I sutured clasps and adorned ribbons to my corset-style paper top. I wanted my audience to realize that we should all be comfortable in our own skin. The cotton linter hand pressed paper top was accompanied by a very prom-like skirt, which I assembled from black mesh fabric and elastic.

<sup>7</sup> Hortense Powdermaker. *Hollywood: The Dream Factory*, 39-41.

<sup>8</sup> Sassatelli. *Consumer Culture*, 84.

This outfit from my *Body Armor* series created a space completely covered, yet it openly exposes the conceptual skin that is sutured from various traditional and nontraditional textiles. Wearable art gave me a new control over my subject matter. I could make a clear statement about freedom and empowerment without saying a word.

## The Exhibition



My thesis exhibition included multiple items arranged in a windblown semi-circle that reflects my accumulative body of work through visual storytelling. I created an altar-like book stand that I placed as the central focal point of my installation by including light and sounds hidden under the cloak-like handmade paper bark covering. The viewer was invited to witness my story by interacting with my handmade book where they could read a creative storyline based on the objects within the installation.

*Therefore, I am.* 2018.

Bark covered altar book stand

The outer semi-circle consisted of tree-like structures that created a meditative space that enclosed the viewer(s) within their peripheral spectrum. This environment was installed in part with found 'objects' from the forest it represents: branches, leaves, sounds of nature. The trees were connected with garden ropes. From this rope, I displayed handmade paper sculptures cast from my tools and household items. I selected items that I associate to being a

woman from the woodlands. For example, I left some sheets of paper and clothes pins on the floor like the wind pulled them down to represent the never-ending struggle. Each sheet was letterpress embossed with the title, *Therefore, I am*, to cry out, “Therefore, I am... I am... so much more!” Various paper objects created from a cotton and/or abaca pulp blend was hung on these lines, from tree-to-tree; masks, objects, embossed pages.



*Therefore, I am.* 2018.

Early installation arrangement.

Multiple handmade paper masks are displayed with associated objects that connect the storyline by representing the master-of-the-task that women are expected to portray; in memoriam to the programmed person she is, rather than the free person she could have been. Each mask represents a whimsical portrayal of a skill, trait, or habit developed from an assumed role. I molded each mask by hand to create unique characters. I colored my mask with food coloring and clothing dyes. This seemed more appropriate than commercial pigments when considering the discussion of duties that accumulated on the tasks list of the

women in my family. We can all relate to wearing masks to achieve the accepted standard within our own combination of subgroups.

Collectively, these items tell the story of a woman confined by her love/hate relationship with her culturally constructed identity, and her devotion to submerge her mind, body, and spirit in a sublime space outside of her every day. I painted the objects white to mute their presents. This emphasized my paper casts and my aqua colored binding and directed my audience to follow the path of the provided storyline. This allowed my audience to see me for a brief moment through my colorful narrative while prompting them to project their memoires onto the muted surfaces by association.

### In Reflection

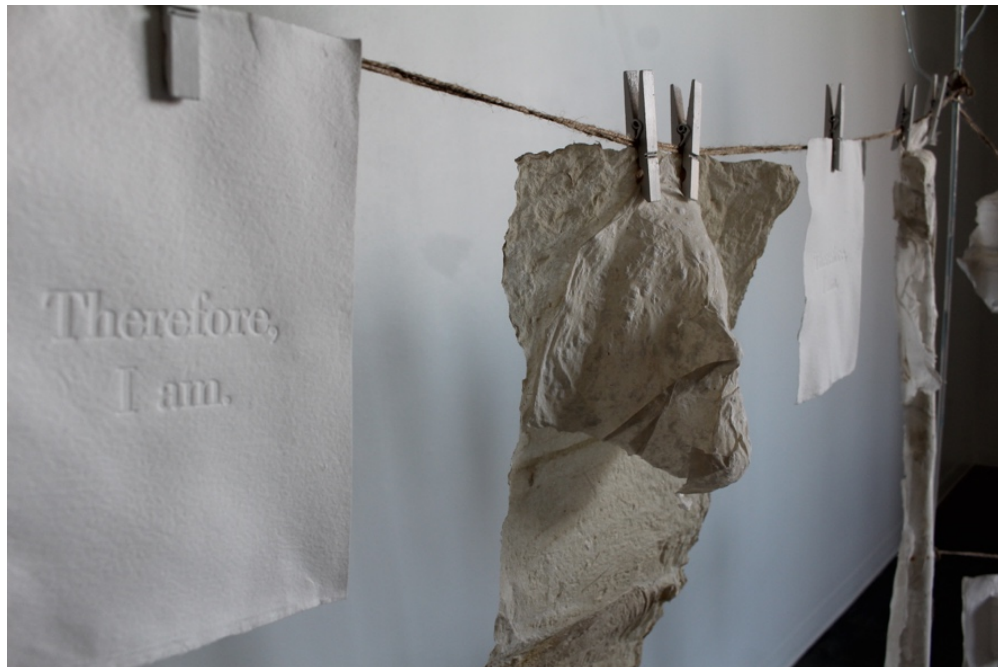
The daily habits, traditions, and expectations associated with women have been ingrained in cultural and social structures across the world. Through extensive research and fieldwork, I discovered that the abuse of power through visual culture, is far reaching and no one, regardless of gender identity, is exempt. Each experience we have with another person, place, or thing molds our identity through the brain's process of memory selection, which is phenomenological unique to each of us; a cerebral fingerprint.

My personal history is overflowing with adventurous journeys, extraordinary characters, and the allure of the unexpected. These diverse components are key to my narratives, and fundamental to the layering of my concepts and materials.

My body of work could be summarized as an extension of the memories that are embedded in my identity, in its rawest form, forged from my real life. Fragments of the person I once was, merging with the person I am becoming, only revealing a glimpse of my

true character in fragmented sections. Like an impression on paper after the pressure of the form is removed, my ghostly self can be faintly observed in my choice of materials and subject matter.

The tasks of making all of these individual pieces echoes that of the very duties I am trying to escape. I would never want to betray myself by giving up any of these traits, or skills gained by playing the assumed role, even when the task seems disheartening. My art is a labor of love, much like that of the daily tasks that are associated to my life as a woman from the woodlands. I enjoy collecting from nature as much as I do constructing objects that are larger than me. I have challenged my artistic skillset and expanded my choice of materials and processes. The most valuable concept I have acquired from my thesis research is that I am much more than my assumed role, and that I am not alone in this way of thinking. Bold statements reflective of my rebellious past show up in my work periodically, but I have discovered that some of the most valuable messages can be expressed with a simple whisper.



*Therefore, I am.* 2018. Self-portrait within the installation.

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